New directions: Othello and his brothers

HOPKINS, Lisa <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9512-0926>

OTHELLO AND HIS BROTHERS

Lisa Hopkins

The Caroline dramatist John Ford engaged so extensively with the plays of Shakespeare that he has some claim to be considered Shakespeare's first literary critic. *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* ingeniously rewrites *Romeo and Juliet* to make its lovers not inappropriately divided by family but inappropriately united by it; *The Lover's Melancholy* equally creatively combines elements of *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*; and *Perkin Warbeck* revisits the narrative substance of *Richard III* in the style of *Richard II*. Most insistently, though, Ford revisits *Othello*. There are echoes of it as well as of *Romeo and Juliet* in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore,* in the shape of Soranzo's murderous jealousy, and the debt is unmistakable in two other plays, *Love's Sacrifice* and *The Lady's Trial*. In the first of these, both the Italian setting and the basic plot premise of *Othello* are reprised as Philippo Caraffa, the Duke of Pavia, goaded into suspecting that his wife is having an affair with his closest friend, murders them both. The Iago character, Roderico D'Avolos, has names which echo both the actual name of Roderigo and the supposed diabolism of Iago; the Desdemona character, the Duchess Bianca, has a name which echoes that of the courtesan who loves Cassio. The Duke doubly recalls the language of Othello himself when he says 'I am a monarch of felicity, / Proud in a pair of jewels rich and beautiful',[1] recalling both Othello's initial happiness - 'I cannot speak enough of this content' - and his subsequent comparison of Desdemona to a pearl and to a chrysolite;[2] D'Avolos' interpretation of what he takes Bianca and Fernando to be saying recalls Iago's similar glossing of Cassio's alleged dream (2.3.53ff); Fernando clearly shares Cassio's scale of values when he reacts with lightning speed to a perceived threat to his reputation: 'How's that? My reputation? Lay aside / Superfluous ceremony. Speak, what is't?' (I.i.213-4), just as Cassio regards his reputation as 'the immortal part of myself' (2.3.259-60). Bianca

proposes to intercede for Roseilli (I.2.171-5) and later for Mauruccio (4.1.122-3) as Desdemona does for Cassio (3.3.45-51); and the Abbot of Monaco, who is Bianca's uncle and arrives on a visit, echoes Lodovico. Also as in *Othello* there are games played with the audience's sense of time: Bianca says at 2.1.141 that this is the third time Fernando has told her he loves her, but it is the first such declaration that we have seen. We also experience as preternaturally short the time elapsing between the revelation of Julia's, Colona's and Morona's pregnancies and their entrance each with a baby in her arms. Ford's final rewriting of *Othello* comes in his last play, *The Lady's Trial*, which is also set in Italy (this time in Genoa), and here the parallels are even closer in that the hero Auria first wars against the Turks and is subsequently sent to govern the island of Corsica. Again, too, it is the hero's friend and most trusted counsellor who assures him that his wife is unfaithful, and again the warrior husband is older than his wife.

Nor is Ford the only writer of the period to revisit *Othello*. Shakespeare himself does so, twice. The first time is in *Cymbeline*, where the hero Posthumus, convinced that his wife Imogen is unfaithful to him, orders his servant Pisanio to kill her; the second is in *The Winter's Tale*, where Leontes, similarly convinced, similarly orders the deaths of his wife and his friend. A rather different play written a couple of years after *The Winter's Tale*, Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, also has features in common with *Othello* (indeed there is a Longman volume which pairs editions of the two).[3] Herod resolves that 'Thou shalt not liue faire fiend to cozen more, / With heauy semblance, as thou cousnedst mee';[4] he feels that 'I had but one inestimable Iewell, / Yet one I had no monarch had the like' (sig. H3v); and the Arabian king, like Cassio, is badly wounded in the leg as a result of a man's belief (in this case justified) that he is having an affair with his wife (sig. D3v). For all the marked similarities, though, each of these plays also has equally marked differences from *Othello*. In

this essay, I want to consider those differences and ask what they can tell us about Shakespeare's play and about contemporary perceptions of what were the crucial issues raised in it.

When the raw materials of *Othello* are reused in these reworkings, some of them are kept and some are jettisoned. An element which only some of these retellings have in common is an age difference between the husband and the wife: the Duke in *Love's Sactifice* is older than the lovers (5.1.68), and Bianca reproaches him with it; Auria is older than Spinella. This is, however, not the case in either *The Winter's Tale* or *Cymbeline*, or at least not obviously so. One aspect of the original story which nearly all subsequent versions dispense with is Cyprus, setting for four of the five acts of the play (the single exception is *The Tragedy of Mariam*, and even there it is glanced at only obliquely, when Mariam mentions 'beauties Goddesse Paphos Queene' [sig. G4r]). While *The Lady's Trial*, *Love's Sacrifice*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* either retain or at least visit the Italian setting (*The Lady's Trial* is set in Genoa, *Love's Sacrifice* in Pavia, *The Winter's Tale* partly in Sicily, and *Cymbeline* contains two scenes in Rome), none of them has the faintest interest in Cyprus. This suggests that whatever ironic overtones may be generated by the fact that Cyprus is traditionally associated with Venus, goddess of love, are essentially incidental, and certainly not worth making an effort to retain. But Cyprus also had other overtones for a Renaissance audience, and ones which seem to have been of rather greater interest: it was the stake in the battle of Lepanto, a crucial conflict between Christian and Turkish forces over who should control the lands and seas of the eastern Mediterranean. *The Lady's Trial* too is interested in that question - the hero Auria departs to fight a successful nattle against the Turks and is subsequently rewarded with the governorship of Corsica - and *Cymbeline* in questions of colonial power and national expansion more generally, for both it and *The Tragedy of Mariam* show a world in which a

proud indigenous nation is pitted against the rapidly advancing shadow of Rome. Even *The Winter's Tale,* as I have argued elsewhere,[5] can be seen as touching on issues pertinent ot the developing English colonial enterprise.

A concomitant of this is that two of Othello's closest analogues, in *The Lady's Trial* and in *Cymbeline*, are also soldiers, as are a number of other characters in their respective plays. The Duke stabs Bianca himself, and we can clearly see very conflicted views on how soldiers are likely to behave. On the one hand, it seems that if they do not have a war to fight outside the house, they are likely to fight one in it. At the same time, though, it is also firmly indicated that soldiers are acutely aware of a code of conduct which governs when and in what circumstances they may and may not fight. In *Mariam*, Constabarus, husband of Herod's wayward sister Salome, declares that 'I'm apt enough to fight in any case, / But yet for Salome I will not fight' (sig. D2v). Constabarus is not, he assures his opponent, a coward, and indeed he is quick enough to leap into action when his opponent ventures to doubt this assertion, and subsequently triumphs in their encounter with impressive ease; but his unfaithful wife is not, it seems, a worthy cause for a quarrel. A similar reluctance to fight marks the tetchy first encounter between Aurio and Aurelio in *The Lady's Trial* after the latter has accused the former's wife of adultery: when Auria draws his sword, Aurelio at first refuses to be provoked, and by the time he eventually is so it is Auria who is ready to temporise (3.3. 125-140). Ford is typically reticent in this play about his characters' motivations and psychology, but later events suggest that Auria is from the outset inclined to an instinctive faith in Spinella's innocence but is also aware that it will be hugely difficult to rehabilitate her reputation once it has been called into question, so he is unwilling at this stage to commit himself by either fighting his friend or by deliberately and pointedly refusing to do so. We might also notice the trouble Bianca in *Love's Sacrifice*, who is

positively eager to die, has to provoke her husband into killing her. This may perhaps explain what might otherwise seem a bizarre and puzzling feature of *Othello*, which is Othello's willingness to let Iago arrange the death of Cassio rather than challenge and fight him. If Desdemona is unfaithful she is not worth fighting for, and perhaps too he still hopes to conceal what he has done, less I think out of cowardice than from abhorrence at being publicly revealed as a cuckold: certainly when he hears Emilia coming he says 'Let me the curtains draw' (5.2.103), pretends not to hear Desdemona groan (5.2.117), and asks disingenuously 'Why, how should she be murdered?' (5.2.124).

One of the most noticeable and to our eyes significant differences comes in the treatment of race. Apart from the fact that Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* twice mentions the Moorish-derived form of the morris dance (I.2.73 and I.2.229) and that Libya is mentioned briefly in *The Winter's Tale,* when Florizel attempts to pass Perdita off as the daughter of its king, no other text telling the story of Othello's brothers registers any awareness of Africa, and none even hints at any form of racial difference between the hero and hero's wife or the rest of those around him. But surely *Othello* is centrally interested in race?

I have suggested elsewhere that *Othello* reproduces some of the concerns and emotions generated by Black Virgins,[6] statues or images of the Virgin Mary showing her with a dark skin, either because an originally paler image had been darkened by candle smoke or as an acknowledgement of the fact that as a first-century inhabitant of Palestine she was likely to have been darker rather than fairer. This is an idea that might just conceivably be supported by a definite link between black man and black virgin in Jan Jansz Mostaert's *Portrait of an African Man, c. 1525-30* wearing a hat badge that commemorates a visit to the Black Madonna of Hal in Belgium. While some of those concerns were about race, many others

were not, and in this context, it is worth noting that *Othello* is not the only play in which *Love's Sacrifice* is interested. Fiormonda's unsuccessful courtship of Fernando (I.1.140ff) is very obviously modelled on the Duchess of Malfi's of Antonio. The chess game in 2.3 recalls *Women Beware Women* (there too the heroine is named Bianca). Perhaps most notably, Roseilli's opening question 'Depart the court?' (I.i.1) recalls *The White Devil*, which has a black / white pattern denoting abstract polarities rather than actual ethnicity, and whose secondary heroine Isabella de' Medici was based on a real woman of that name whose body was displayed after her murder and was said to be 'black in its upper half, but completely white below',[7] and his subsequent disguise as a fool equally obviously recalls *The Changeling*, where a similar principle underlies the dual identity of Beatrice-Joanna, whose hyphenated name, Sara Eaton suggests, recalls both the spiritual guide Beatrice and Gehenna, hell.[8] The presence of such a pattern is also a marked feature of *The Tragedy of Mariam,* where despite the fact that none of the characters is actually black, metaphorical blackening is laid on with a liberal hand, particularly onto the women. Kim F. Hall has powerfully argued that in early modern discourse blackness is a relative rather than an absolute term,[9] Dympna Callaghan, in an illuminating recent discussion, has similarly suggested that 'what allows whiteness to be represented at all is a certain conceptualization of sexual difference', and she further argues for the inherent instability and contingency of whiteness in her point that '[o]n stage, whiteface was probably the primary way of signifying femininity. It was an impersonation, just like blackface'.[10] Even the whitest of women can thus be seen as always already black, and this certainly seems to be the case in *The Tragedy of Mariam.* When Herod comes to believe that Mariam has planned to kill him, he rages,

> Now doe I know thy falshood, painted Diuill
> Thou white Inchantres. Oh thou art so foule,
> That Ysop cannot clense thee worst of euill.

(sig. F2v)

When he vacillates, Mariam becomes white again:

> Here take her to her death Come backe, come backe,
>
> What ment I to depriue the world of light:
>
> To muffle Iury in the foulest blacke,
>
> That euer was an opposite to white.

(sig. F3v)

It is Salome, by contrast, who is now blackened as Herod tells her that 'You are to her a Sun burnt Blackamore' (sig. G2v). Herod is speaking solely in terms of appearance, falling back on the standard opposition between beauty and blackness, but his former wife adduces a rather different sense when she tells Mariam 'Your soule is blacke and spotted, full of sinne' (sig. G4v). Blackness, for Doris, is the opposite not of beauty but of virtue, but what is really apparent here is the extent to which it is the schematic and associative potential of blackness which is being mobilised rather than an essentially racialised understanding of it.

Collectively, the various retellings of *Othello* thus suggest that what happens to Othello is note, to misquote Ali G, cos he is black,[11] but because he is different, as in the 1997 Washington Shakespeare Theatre production starring Patrick Stewart as an Othello who is the only white member of an otherwise all-black cast. In other words, the stories of Othello's brothers would suggest that Othello's own behaviour is to be understood not in terms of a racialised concept of human identity, but of the insidious impact of the cultural construction of difference: he is less black than marked as 'black', with all the implications of the cultural baggage which that trailed for an English audience. The distinction is no mere abstraction but one central to the crucial philosophical difference between the both still influential but mutually contradictory official praxes of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, in that

the one (New Historicism) perceives all protest as fundamentally futile and always already structurally contained and the other (Cultural Materialism) regards it as capable of effecting genuine and meaningful change. Fundamentally, this impacts on the question of what this play is actually saying to its readers and audiences. For Thomas Rymer, the moral of the play was that wives should look well to their linen. If Othello's actions are dictated by the colour of his skin, it is scarcely less reductive. If however they are a response to a culturally constucted imposition of essentially arbitrary ideas of difference, then we have something that we can learn.

If Othello's behaviour is not conditioned by his blackness, might Iago's be equally independent of its apparent determinants? In fact these plays do not always find an Iago-figure necessary at all - Leontes acts as his own, and Iachimo in *Cymbeline* is motivated largely by financial considerations and is happy to confirm Imogen's innocence at the close. Aurelio in *The Lady's Trial* is more intriguing because his motive for exposing what he takes to be Spinella's infidelity is on the face of it prompted both by genuine cause for suspicion and real concern for his friend. Nevertheless both Auria and Spinella are inclined to read his actions rather differently. Spinella sees him as motivated by a desire to ingratiate himself with Auria and as prompted by a sense of her as a threat to their relationship:

> Whiles you, belike,
> Are furnished with some news for entertainement
> Which must become your friendship, to be knit
> More fast betwixt your souls by my removal
> Both from his heart and memory.
>
> (2.3.79-80)

Even Auria is not particularly grateful to him, and it is notable that when Auria chooses a husband for Spinella's sister, the perfectly virtuous Castanna, it is not the conspicuously righteous Aurelio whom he picks but the flawed but penitent Adurni, whose unsuccessful attempt to seduce Spinella caused all the trouble in the first place. Aurelio himself attributes his motive to 'curiosity': 'You will pardon / A rash and over-busy curiosity' (5.3.176-7). This is a word which Ford is fond of, and the meaning that seems cumulatively to emerge from his uses of it is of an almost pathologically close investigation into other things and people which seems primarily to be prompted by a sense of edginess and uncertainty about the enquirer's own position, giving rise to an unhealthy interest in the behaviour of one's neighbours of the sort which motivates Angelo in *Measure for Measure* and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Equally striking is the fact that two of the Iago figures are female. In *Love's Sacrifice*, D'Avolos does catch the Duke's attention by muttering 'Beshrew my heart, but that's not so good' (3.2.5), but he does not play with him as Iago does with Othello - soon he is telling him straight out 'In short, my lord, and plain discovery, you are a cuckold' (3.3.38-9). In effect he splits the role with Fiormonda, who slightly recalls Bianca in *Othello* in that she loves Fernando, but like Salome in *The Tragedy of Mariam* is clearly motivated primarily by jealousy of the beauty of her brother's wife, widely reckoned to be superior to her own. If these characters were to be seen as collectively offering a 'reading' of *Othello*, the explanation of Iago's behaviour that they would implicitly be endorsing is his resentment of the fact that Cassio 'hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly' (5.1.19-20).

As well as on Othello and on Iago, the stories of Othello's brothers also turn the spotlight at least obliquely onto Desdemona, for collectively they raise the question of what female infidelity actually *is*. Is it the mere physical fact of a woman having sex with a man other than her husband? Certainly this is what seems to be at the heart of the pervasive

Renaissance obsession with cuckoldry: a visceral fear, in an age before paternity tests, of inadvertently bequeathing one's property to an infant not biologically one's own. But the stories of Othello's brothers suggest that something rather different from and rather subtler than this might be at stake. In the first place, it is notable that in almost all these cases there is what one might well feel to be a positively pointed avoidance of the question of parenthood in all these plays, with the solitary exception of *The Winter's Tale*. Although Caraffa speaks of the possibility that Bianca might be pregnant (5.1.61-4), and Ford is certainly not above staging the murder of a pregnant woman (he does it in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*), there is no other indication that this might be so; no one raises the question of whether Spinella might be pregnant; Posthumus never thinks of it in relation to Imogen; and Herod's convicion that Mariam has been serially unfaithful to him does not result in any doubts about the paternity of her son. In the case of Othello himself contemporary controversies about the role of the respective parents in determining the racial characteristics of babies would mean that the play is virtually crying out for the introduction of such a motif; and yet Shakespeare, it seems, has no interest in it. Instead, attention is dislocated onto a very different question: not what difference adultery itself makes, but what difference *knowing about it* makes. Othello asks,

> What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust?
> I saw't not, thought it not, it harmed not me,
> I slept the next night well, fed well, was free and merry;
> I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips;
> He that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen,
> Let him not know't, and he's not robbed at all.
>
> (3.3.341-6)

Leontes too draws attention to the (supposed) discovery of the act rather than to the act itself when he says 'I have drunk, and seen the spider', as does Herod when he says 'I would I were like any begger poore, / So for I for false my Mariam did not know' (sig. F3r).

This in turn resonates on two separate levels. Firstly, there is the question from passing from innocence to experience, and while discovery of a partner's adultery might be a particularly powerful and emotive instance of this, it is of course merely one among many, and is a symptom of something much more deeply-rooted and troubling than itself. That there is however no simple binary divide between innocence and experience is suggested by the games *Othello* plays with time. In *Mariam*, the closing Chorus draws attention to the fact that the action has occupied only a single day; in *The Lady's Trial* and *Cymbeline*, characters make sea journeys, and in *The Winter's Tale*, extraordinarily, we are explicitly told that sixteen years have passed between the two halves of the story; but no one can confidently say how long the action of *Othello* takes to unfold. Perhaps Ford was sensitive to the force of this, for he too blurs the time scheme in both *The Lady's Tragedy* and *Love's Sacrifice*, and couples this with a marked oscillation of attitude on the part of both the Othello figures, Auria and Caraffa, as though for them the boundary between innocence and experience has been rendered permeable.

Secondly, we are made acutely aware that the fact of knowing raises the question of what to do about it, because it is symptomatic of all these plays that the discovery or apparent discovery of adultery is almost invariably not a private but a distressingly, damagingly public affair. Posthumus, Auria, Othello himself and the Duke of Pavia all have this in common, that they do not *discover* their partners' alleged adultery but are *told* of it, with the inevitable concomitant that it then becomes incumbent on their sense of their public self to do

something about it (in the case of Pavia, this is exacerbated by the fact that his sister Fiormonda is also party to the revelation of Bianca's secret meetings with Fernando, and the situation is of course further inflected by the fact that, as she knows, these really have occurred). Leontes is the exception here, since he is famously his own Iago, and it is therefore particularly noteworthy that his virtually instant reaction is to publicise it anyway, even though Camillo is both an unwilling and an incredulous recipient of his confidences. It is clear that the actual or apparent adultery of a wife thus has public as well as private consequences for a husband, for in order not to lose face and credibility he must be seen to react, and react in a way commensurate with the expectations of his peer group and culture (while English gentlemen don't on the whole kill their wives, unless perhaps by the occasional display of conspicuous kindness, Italians definitely do).

This public aspect of infidelity complicates still further the already vexed question of *Othello*'s genre, and here too the stories of Othello's brothers have something to say about the matter. It has often been suggested that *Othello* has less in common with tragedy of state, the genre so securely inhabited by *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, and more with the quieter, rather differently configured one of domestic tragedy. The inclusion of actual domestic details such as the handkerchief, the pillow and the wedding sheets which Desdemona orders to be placed on the bridal bed would seem to support this, as would the fact that Othello, alone of the 'big four' tragic heroes, is neither head of state himself nor heir to that position, so that what happens in his private household has no repercussions in the community as a whole. To throw the spotlight onto the extent which others know of his predicament, though, offers a different perspective, forcing us to notice not only that the climax takes place in a bedroom but also that it is a bedroom which has essentially lost its

private character as more and more of the characters crowd into it; it makes *Othello* seem less like a domestic tragedy than like a domestic tragedy *manqué*.

More probingly, though, some at least of these plays raise the possibility that infidelity is something more, and more significant, than a mere physical act: it is, as adultery is so often felt to be, a betrayal, and as such it is more a product of, and more damaging to, the spirit rather than the mind. In *Love's Sacrifice*, Bianca draws a sharp and, many critics have felt, essentially quite arbitrary distinction between *wanting* to commit adultery and actually *doing* it. She loves Fernando; she has no hesitation in letting her husband know this, and abusing him to his face for being old and ugly; she even offers Fernando her body, but with the proviso that she will kill herself immediately if he accepts. In her own eyes she thus remains innocent, and what is really surprising is that so many of the other characters, most notably her husband, accept her at her own estimation: as soon as Caraffa is assured that she has not actually slept with Fernando he apparently forgets all the wounding things she said, immediately acclaims her as a wronged martyr whom he has murdered without cause, and kills himself in remorse. Despite attempts to read this in the the light of Queen Henrietta Maria's interest in Platonic love,[12] there has been no shortage of critics who have felt that there is something deeply distasteful about this fetishising of the mere fact of physical contact, and that Bianca's supposed innocence is a pure technicality which ignores the fact that she has undoubtedly lusted after Fernando and thus committed what we might well classify as adultery in her heart.

Shakespeare himself takes the question to precisely the opposite extreme in *Cymbeline,* when Posthumus apostrophises a piece of material stained with what he takes to be Imogen's blood:

> Yea, bloody cloth, I'll keep thee: for I wish'd

Thou shouldst be colour'd thus. You married ones,
If each of you should take this course, how many
Must murder wives much better than themselves
For wrying but a little?[13]

The reference to a 'bloody cloth' clearly invites us to compare this piece of cloth with the handkerchief in *Othello*, and register the astonishing difference in attitude between Othello himself and Posthumus, who alone among husbands in Renaissance drama forgives his wife while still believing her to be guilty, on the grounds that her supposed adultery with Iachimo is in fact only a small flaw in an otherwise admirable character. Sexual fidelity thus becomes not the be-all and end-all of a relationship but a component within it. Seeing Othello as the midpoint between these two positions may perhaps help us to notice the extent to which he kills Desdemona only partly because of the damage she has done to him and also because of the damage she has done to herself, or at least to his own image of her perfection.

An inevitable and concomitant part of this interest in when and what one knows is an interest in *how* one knows. This is a concern so stongly marked that it would not be far-fetched to see these plays as collectively engaged in a species of sustained epistemological enquiry. I have argued elsewhere that in an *Othello*-informed play, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Ford is fascinated by the question of how one knows.[14] There are also clear signs of such an interest in *The Lady's Trial*, for paradoxically, it is only when Spinella faints that Auria declares 'Spinella, / Regent of my affections, thou hast conquered'.[15] It is true that there have been hints before this that he has never really believed Aurelio's insinuations, but he has certainly seemed less than sure of how he should publicly manage the fact that they have been made in the first place, and unwilling to risk simply ignoring them. In his delicate attempt to finesse a conclusion which will leave everyone's reputation retrievable and forestall any potential

disasters, in an atmosphere in which one misplaced word could precipitate a problem, Spinella's sudden descent into wordlessness affords the perfect opportunity for him to pre-empt any alternative interpretations and ensure the supremacy of his own construction of events. It is a moment which recalls the parallel manoeuvre of the Friar in *Much Ado About Nothing* when he imposes a reading of Hero's faint as manifesting innocence rather than guilt, but which also reprises Iago's sleight-of-hand in persuading Othello to accept his glossing of the exchange between Cassio and Bianca, when he effectively overwrites subtitles onto a scene otherwise perceived only as dumbshow. There is also a similar moment in *Love's Sacrifice*, again involving a character named Bianca and another whose role closely echoes that of Cassio, when D'Avolos spies on a meeting between Bianca and Fernando and supplies a running commentary which implies that he either cannot hear what they are saying or simply disbelieves it. In both these instances the audience is acutely conscious of the extent to which meaning is being made rather than revealed and of the provisional and uncertain nature of what is being accepted as evidence.

A central question in *Othello* is the nature of proof and the extent to which 'Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ' (3.3.325-7), for Shakespeare too is interested in the question of how we know what we know, but he treats it rather differently. For Leontes, it takes the form of a sudden intuition. Of particular note is the striking irony that it is Posthumus who is given arguably the strongest reason to make him doubt his wife, and yet it is he who is quickest to forgive: here, as in Auria's interpretation of Spinella's faint, there seems to be a directly inverse correlation between the ostensible weight of the evidence and the belief afforded to it, almost as if it is only the perverse and the occluded that truly carry conviction, and this is I think certainly the case in *Othello*, where it is remarkable how much of Iago's attack on Othello consists not in the providing of actual

evidence but in persuading his victim of a supposedly right way to interpret such evidence as there is.[16] As Hermione says in *The Winter's Tale* and as the stories of all Othello's brothers confirm, the lives of women stand in the level of men's dreams.

Women are not quite powerless, though, for in all the stories of Othello's brothers, the voice of the wife is important. In *The Lady's Trial*, Auria seems both genuinely to want to know what Spinella will say and also to be acutely aware that the public rebuttal of the accusation is a crucial component of his strategy not only to face up to the situation but actively to defuse and recuperate it, and what she does eventually say is particularly striking in that not only does she declare that the accusation is unfounded but also implies that the question should never have been asked because of the lack of faith it implies: 'You can suspect, / So reconciliation then is needless' (5.2.136-7). In *The Winter's Tale*, though Leontes may not want to know Hermione's response to his accusation, the audience certainly does, for it rarely fails to provide an electrifying moment in the theatre:

> Since what I am to say, must be but that
> Which contradicts my accusation, and
> The testimony on my part, no other
> But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
> To say 'not guilty': mine integrity,
> Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it,
> Be so receiv'd.
>
> (III.ii.22-28)

Imogen's protestation of her innocence is equally striking:

> False to his bed? What is it to be false?
> To lie in watch there, and to think on him?

To weep 'twixt clock and clock? If sleep charge Nature,

To break it with a fearful dream of him,

And cry myself awake? That's false to's bed, is it?

(III.iv.41-5)

Even Bianca, who one might well feel does not really have a leg to stand on, manages to stop insulting her husband just long enough to inform him that he is mistaken. Separately and collectively, these women make Desdemona look ineffectual and inarticulate, and Shakespeare himself seems to have felt that he had flattened the women's perspective unduly, because he revised the part of the play that dealt with it, developing significantly the dialogue between Desdemona and Emilia. However, a slightly different perspective on events is offered by *The Tragedy of Mariam*, because Mariam does speak out, and that is exposed as having negative consequences of a rather different sort. Even Sohemus, who is well-disposed towards her, regards it as a blot on an otherwise admirable character - 'Vnbridled speech is Mariams worst disgrace' (sig. E3r) - and the Chorus is even more condemnatory:

Tis not enough for one that is a wife

To keepe her spotles from an act of ill:

But from suspition she should free her life,

And bare her selfe of power as well as will.

Tis not so glorious for her to be free,

As by her proper self restrain'd to bee.

(sig. E4v)

Worst of all, Herod reads her willingness to speak her opinion as *prima facie* evidence of adultery: 'shee's vnchaste, / Her mouth will ope to eu'ry strangers eare' (sig. G2v). This suggests that ultimately it makes no difference whether the woman speaks or is silent, since

either can be equally damning, and it may help to make us more alert to the double-bind which keeps Desdemona so fatally silent.

One final and rather unexpected feature of the stories of Othello and his brothers is the extent to which they all, albeit in rather different ways, intertwine a discourse of the sacred with that of the personal relationship which in each case lies at the heart of the narrative. In *Love's Sacrifice* the fact that the final scene takes place in front of Bianca's tomb makes a certain amount of religious atmosphere inevitable, but does not wholly account for the full panoply of the ceremony and the odour of sanctity which develop around what increasingly comes to seem like a shrine rather than simply a grave. In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, religion is made always already implicit by the fact that this is a story about Herod, a figure famous primarily in the context of the Biblical narrative of Jesus' birth. In *The Lady's Trial* Auria says of the reconciliation between himself and Spinella 'Our holy day / Deserves the calendar' (5.2.221-2); in *Cymbeline* Posthumus is visited in sleep by the god Jove himself, and in *The Winter's Tale* Paulina refers to the location of Hermione's statue as a chapel and adjures her hearers that 'It is requir'd / You do awake your faith' (V.iii.94-5). In *Othello* itself the narrative of Othello's relationship with Desdemona is subtly counterpointed by the narrative of his commitment to Christianity, apparently as a result of conversion, and the possiblity that this might now falter, for one reason or another. Iago declares that it would be easy for Desdemona 'To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism' (2.3.338). Othello does not do that, but he does fall into the deeply unChristian position of committing the sin of despair, as he apostrophises the dead Desdemona,

> When we shall meet at compt
> This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven
> And fiends will snatch at it.

(5.2.271-3)

And in the very act of dying he paradoxically manages both to affirm his Christianity and yet simultaneously collapse it into its own opposite:

in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,

I took by th'throat the circumcised dog

And smote him - thus!

(5.2.350-4)

In this context it is notable that Othello should twice mention his parents in connection with the handkerchief (3.4.56-77, 5.2.214-5), for as far as this narrative of salvation and damnation is concerned Othello's closest brother is in fact that first father Adam, betrayed (not in a sexual sense but nonetheless devastatingly) by that first mother, Eve, for like Adam he has passed from innocence to experience and like Adam he finds the way back barred by a beautiful, terrible, judging face and a bright, fatal sword. These echoes are reinforced by the obvious parallel between Iago's jealousy of the more favoured Cassio and Cain's of the more favoured Abel, and this is a concern even more marked if there are indeed resonances between the play of the phenomenon of Black Virgins and the metaphorical meanings of blackness which they were so often seem to evoke remind us again of how little this play's story has to do with the carnal concept of sexual knowledge and how much it has to do with other forms of knowledge and belief. Adultery is thus confirmed not as something solely corporeal and contingent but as centrally constitutive of the spiritual condition and ultimate eschatological desinty of the spouse who is or believes themselves wronged, as if husband and wife were indeed one flesh and the corruption of one part of that composite body irredeemably tainted the other. 'Not fierce Othello in so loud a strain / Roar'd for the

Handkerchief that caus'd his pain' wrote Pope mischievously; but the stories of Othello's brothers show that the handkerchief (itself connected to religion insofar as it resembles a Veronica's veil)[17] is no trifle but the outward sign of a cataclysm, and its whiteness marks not a blankness but something whose magnitude defies inscription.

Notes

[1] John Ford, *Love's Sacrifice*, edited by A. T. Moore (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), I.i.132-3. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

[2] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, edited by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Thomas Nelson and sons, 1997), 2.1.189, 5.2.345, and 5.2.141.

[3] Clare Carroll, ed., *Othello and the Tragedy of Mariam* (London: Longman, 2002).

[4] Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedie of Mariam, the Faire Queene of Iewry* (London: Thomas Creede for Richard Hawkins, 1613), sig. F3r.

[5] Lisa Hopkins, 'Pocahontas and *The Winter's Tale*', *Shakespeare* 1.2 (December 2005), pp. 121-135.

[6] Lisa Hopkins, 'Black but Beautiful: *Othello* and the Cult of the Black Madonna', in *Marian Moments in Early Modern Drama*, edited by Regina Buccola and Lisa Hopkins (Ashgate, 2007), 75-86, p. 80.

[7] Caroline P. Murphy, *Isabella de' Medici: the Glorious Life and Tragic End of a Renaissance Princess* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 326.

[8] Sara Eaton, 'Beatrice-Joanna and the Rhetoric of Love in *The Changeling*', *Theatre Journal* 36.3 (October 1984), pp. 371-82, p. 381.

[9] Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[10] Dympna Callaghan, '"Othello was a white man': properties of race on Shakespeare's stage', in *Alternative Shakespeares*, vol. 2, edited by Terence Hawkes (London: Routledge, 1996), 198 and 202.

[11] See for instance Gary Younge, 'Is it cos I is black?', *The Guardian*, Wednesday 12 January 2000. Online: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2000/jan/12/race

[12] See for instance G. F. Sensabaugh, 'John Ford and Platonic Love in the Court', *Studies in Philology* 36.2 (April, 1939), pp. 206-26.

[13] William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, edited by J. M. Nosworthy (London: Arden, 2007), V.i.1-5.

[14] 'Knowing their Loves: Knowledge, Ignorance and Blindness in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*', *Renaissance Forum* 3:1 (spring, 1998) <http://www.hull.ac.uk/renforum/v3no1/hopkins.htm>

[15] John Ford, *The Lady's Trial*, edited by Lisa Hopkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 5.2.142-3.

[16] See Lisa Hopkins, 'The representation of narrative: what happens in *Othello*', *Journal X* 1:2 (spring, 1997), pp. 159-174, p. 168.

[17] See for instance Lina Perkins Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre: Recollection, Properties and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 142, and Richard Wilson, 'Dyed in Mummy: *Othello* and the Mulberries', in *Performances of the Sacred in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, edited by Susanne Rupp and Tobias Döring (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 135-153, p. 147.